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Towards an understanding of Australian genre cinema and entertainment: beyond the limitations of ‘Ozploitation’ discourse

Mark David Ryan

Abstract

While Australian cinema has produced popular movie genres since the 1970s, including action/adventure, road movies, crime, and horror movies, genre cinema has occupied a precarious position within a subsidised national cinema and has been largely written out of film history. In recent years the documentary *Not Quite Hollywood* (2008) has brought Australia’s genre movie heritage from the 1970s and 1980s back to the attention of cinephiles, critics and cult audiences worldwide. Since its release, the term ‘Ozploitation’ has become synonymous with Australian genre movies. In the absence of discussion about genre cinema within film studies, Ozploitation (and ‘paracinema’ as a theoretical lens) has emerged as a critical framework to fill this void as a *de facto* approach to genre and a conceptual framework for understanding Australian genres movies. However, although the Ozploitation brand has been extremely successful in raising the awareness of local genre flicks, Ozploitation discourse poses problems for film studies, and its utility is limited for the study of Australian genre movies. This paper argues that Ozploitation limits analysis of genre movies to the narrow confines of exploitation or trash cinema and obscures more important discussion of how Australian cinema engages with *popular* movies genres, the idea of Australian filmmaking as entertainment, and the dynamics of commercial filmmaking practises more generally.

Introduction

The terms ‘popular movie genres’ and ‘entertainment’ rarely figure in discussion of Australian cinema. A great deal of criticism of the Australian film industry’s performance in recent years, however, has revolved around the failure of Australian films to connect with audiences, and without being explicit, the subtext of such criticism is often that Australian movies are not entertaining. Within film studies, commercial filmmaking is generally associated with popular movie genres such as action/adventure, science fiction, crime, and horror among others, and film theory has long identified genre as having a symbiotic relationship with audience. Indeed, Hollywood – dominating global audiovisual markets – is regarded, and often derided, as a genre cinema. While Australian cinema has produced a stream of local ‘genre movies’ since the 1970s New Wave of Australian Cinema, genre cinema has occupied a precarious position within a subsidised national cinema.

Nevertheless, Australia’s genre movie heritage has experienced a revival in recent years. Mark Hartley’s fast-paced documentary *Not Quite Hollywood: The Wild, Untold Story of Ozploitation!* (2008) has brought Australian genre movies from the 1970s and 1980s to the attention of cinephiles, critics and trash/cult audiences worldwide. Revolving around interviews with prominent filmmakers including Quentin Tarantino and *Saw*’s (2004) James Wan and Leigh Whannell, international stars Dennis Hopper and Jamie Lee Curtis, and Australia’s genre filmmaking royalty

Antony Ginnane, Brian Trenchard-Smith, and Everett De Roche, the documentary tells the largely neglected history of genre filmmaking down under. Since the documentary's release, the term 'Ozploitation' – a portmanteau of 'Aussie' shortened to 'Oz' and 'exploitation' cinema – accounting predominantly for action, road movies, 'ocker' comedies, sexploitation, and horror movies (*Not Quite Hollywood* 2008), has become synonymous with Australian genre movies.

In the absence of discussion about Australian genre cinema within film studies, Ozploitation has become a critical framework or reference point to fill this void as a *de facto* approach to genre and a conceptual framework for understanding Australian genres movies. In only a very short time, Ozploitation has been adopted by screen studies' courses in higher education for the study of Australian genre movies. It has become a naturalized term in industry literature and genre criticism, a buzz word for cinephilia, and a marketing label or brand for film festivals and the repackaging of back catalogues. While the Ozploitation brand has been extremely successful in raising the awareness of local genre flicks, the Ozploitation discourse poses problems for film studies and its utility is limited for the study of Australian genre movies.

This paper suggests that the study of Ozploitation devalues local genre cinema as it constrains discussion of genre movies to the domain of exploitation and trash cinema. Ozploitation discourse also obscures general arguments for why Australia should produce genre movies. From comedy and fantasy to action and horror movies, movie genres are universal story types which inform production, distribution and consumption. For the Australian film industry to connect with audiences and become more commercially oriented, industry practice must embrace to a greater extent the production of 'entertainment movies', but approaches to genre cannot be limited to exploitation cinema produced for, and consumed predominantly by, cult audiences. The article delineates the position of popular genre movies within Australian cinema studies and policy debates. This is followed by an analysis of Ozploitation and what it means for film studies.

Genre and exploitation cinema

'Genre movies' and 'exploitation cinema' are two important concepts at the core of this paper. Major movie genres include action-adventure, science-fiction, comedy, drama, crime, romance, suspense-thriller, and horror movies among others. Movie genres function as a blueprint for industry production, a marketplace label for advertising and distribution, a viewing contract informing audience consumption (Altman 1999, 14), and a critical label for critique and review (Langford 2005). Genre is therefore a complex term for 'systems of orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text, and subject' (Neale 1981, 6). Genre analysis provides a framework for the analysis of texts sharing family resemblances across textual issues such as thematic and stylistic concerns, character types, iconography and intertextuality; industrial contexts focusing on how feedback loops from distribution, for example, shape a final product (Lobato and Ryan forthcoming 2011), and economic configurations of certain movie types; and numerous other domains from reception to gender issues.

The concept of 'paracinema' – a term coined by Jeffery Sconce in his 1995 essay 'Trashing' the academy: taste, excess, and an emerging politics of cinematic style' –

has become a common theoretical framework for understanding exploitation, trash, or cult cinema. An elastic term accounting for an extremely diverse array of movies from 'badfilm', 'mondo films' to 'beach-party musicals' among countless other trash subgenres, paracinema 'is less a distinct group of films than a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus' (Sconce 1995, 372). Paracinema is a counter cinema in opposition to mainstream cinema. Importantly, 'paracinema hinges on an aesthetic of excess, and ... this paracinematic interest in excess represents an explicitly political challenge to reigning aesthetic discourses' (Sconce 1995, 380). Exploitation filmmaking is generally characterised by gratuitous or 'excessive' nudity, extreme violence, gore, explosions, and so on, driven by sensational marketing, and generally regarded by high-brow critics as 'bad film' rather than quality or serious cinema. Though mainstream movies can be exploitative, trash cinema often denotes narrower niche, or cult audiences.

Australian cinema, genre movies, and film studies

Since the 1970s, Australian cinema has been developed and sustained by cultural policies and public subsidy to foster 'Australian stories', or as Maher, (1999, 13) puts it, the 'representation and preservation of Australian culture, character and identity'. As O'Regan and Ward (2006, 17) have argued, 'for the last 40 years the dominant framework for understanding Australian television' – and the same can be said for Australian cinema more generally – 'has been via its contribution to national identity'. Consequently, Australian film has tended to emphasise 'Australianness' with a faithfulness to social realism (O'Regan 1996; Routt 1999; Mayer 1999; Moran and Vieth 2006). Valuing 'quality' and 'cultural content' over 'entertainment' and 'commercialism', Australian films have tended to be art-house *vis-à-vis* genre-based films. Commercial, sometimes non-culturally specific and international in their appeal, commercial genre movies have been antithetical to these aspirations.

At the very core of this debate is Australian cinema's relationship with Hollywood. According to Rayner (2000, 3), 'the history of filmmaking in Australia ... epitomises the difficult relationships smaller film industries enjoy with Hollywood, which inspires and competes with them'. Australian cinema's refusal to 'recognize ... generic status' has been an attempt to differentiate 'itself from Hollywood, which has always been interested in refining and developing specific film genres' (Mayer 1999, 178). As film critic, and exploitation filmmaker, Philip Brophy (1987a) has argued, 'the "new" cinemas of Britain and Australia are both searching for an identity, and both are overly conscious of being non-American (i.e. contra-genre, anti-crassness, post-Hollywood)'. For film critic Stephen Rowley (1998, 1):

The massive dominance of Hollywood over the worldwide film industry has left film industries of other countries facing a choice between two different options for survival. On the one hand there was the possibility of attempting to emulate Hollywood and to trying to steal some business through direct competition. The other option was to make films that were dramatically different, highlighting the unique qualities of a nation's cinema.

As a consequence, discussion of Australian genre cinema, or local traditions of filmmaking engaging with 'popular' or 'Hollywood' movies genres such as action,

adventure, horror, science-fiction and so on, have rarely figured in Australian film studies. The vast majority of Australia film and cinema studies have focused predominantly on 'peculiarly Australian genres' (Routt 1999), or the 'Australianisation' of international genres through transmutation (Rayner 2000). Australian genres such as the 'ocker comedy', the 'period film', the 'AFC genre', the 'Australian Gothic', the 'male ensemble film' (Rayner 2000; Dermody and Jacka 1988) among others, have become synonymous with Australian film, while popular movie genres are rarely associated with Australian cinema. One exception is Scott Murray's (1994, 97–142) examination of 1970s and 1980s movie genres, acknowledging action-adventure films among more respectable and 'peculiarly Australian' genres such as comedies, period films, sexuality and relationship films, social realist films, and thrillers. It is worthwhile noting that thriller (*Lantana* 2001; *Jindabyne* 2006), war (*Gallipoli* 1981; *Kokoda* 2006), and crime movies (*Two Hands* 1999; *Dirty Deeds* 2002) do tend to garner more critical respect within Australian cinema than action/adventure, horror, fantasy and other disreputable, or more 'Hollywood', genres.

As *Not Quite Hollywood's* Mark Hartley observes, Australian genre films trading 'in sex, violence, action, horror and suspense were ... largely written out of history of Australian feature film' (Mark Hartley, paraphrased in Galvin 2008). For Tom O'Regan (1996, 27–28), 'Australian cinema is discursively produced,' and is 'shaped by the diverse ways in which the public come to know about it by means of agents concerned with it' with critics important gatekeepers to this discursive production and dissemination. Genre movies therefore, have suffered at the hands of hostile critics championing quality Australian cinema – 'overlooked, under-rated and often openly derided by critics' (Galvin 2008).

Yet movies engaging with popular genres are not completely absent from film studies; rather they have been disconnected from discussion of popular movie genres such as action/adventure, science-fiction, horror, crime and so on, and are discussed under other critical frames of reference. In the first instance, occasional discussion of genre movies has revolved around 'exploitation' and 'experimental' cinema and their marginal status within Australian cinema. O'Regan (1996, 173), for example, notes that 'the depth of Australia's contribution to cinema can be seen in more marginal feature and experimental areas. The cinephile imagination has produced a minor strand of Australian exploitation film-making in the 1980s and 1990s'. Such movies have been generally viewed in a negative light, or regarded as curios for their perversity or eccentricity in contrast to cultural films:

these [exploitation movies] have included those which do violence to well-known Australian television personalities in *Turkey Shoot* (Trenchard-Smith) and later *Body Melt* ... these identities were hunted down to be raped and brutally murdered, while, in the later film, the identities literally decompose into a colourful sludge before our eyes after taking vitamin pills (O'Regan 1996, 173).

Exploitation cinema has also been central to the debate of what could be called 'counter-criticism' led by a handful of critics/cinephiles critiquing the narrowness of dominant Australian film culture. An example is Adrian Martin's (1988) criticism of Australian film culture's refusal to recognise experimental and exploitation cinema as

part of Australian cinema's New Wave. For Martin, Australian cinema is a 'nurtured creation' which prevents the natural genesis of a diverse filmmaking culture. Brophy (1987a and 1987b) makes a similar argument in a two part series of articles 'That's Exploitation: Snobs' and 'Turkeys'. According to Brophy, 'film culture's mandates to the industry to produce the professional, refined, sophisticated, nationalistic, sensitive, thought-provoking, personal and socially aware crap' is what 'makes Australian cinema so predictable and unappealing' (1987a, 29). For Brophy 'the only real way a total Australian cinema can develop' and become independent from public subsidy, 'is through a breakdown of the tacky pseudo-highbrow tone it fosters – a tone that only serves to maintain a narrow and outmoded strategy of fusing industry growth with cultural development. In other words ... we need more sex, gags, thrills and gore' (Brophy 1987a, 29).

Carol Laseur's (1992) essay centres on the formation of value within Australian cinema. Refuting high-culture critics' claims that genre movies are debased entertainment unworthy of critical attention, she considers the question:

why are films such as *Sons of Steel* [1989], *Howling III* [1987] and *Hostage* [1983] (to name but a few) seen in terms of the odd, the marginal and the demotic? Interestingly, and to some extent paradoxically, films which are seemingly formulaic or even 'simple' raise a number of complex questions about the nature of generic identity (1).

Finally, genre movies have typically been lumped together under catch-all categories such as 'an aesthetic of commercialism' (Dermody & Jacka 1988, 43–49). One of the most prominent examples of this is the term 'Industry 2', a naturalised term within Australian film studies to account for genre filmmaking, targeting international markets and commercial returns, with little concern for authentic representations of culture or national identity. Such filmmaking tends to be defined in opposition to cultural art-house films produced predominantly for domestic audiences – valuing social realism, authentic cultural representation, and Australian stories (Industry 1). These two competing industry aspirations have been summarised quite simply as a 'discourse of nationalism' and a 'discourse of commercialism' (Dermody and Jacka 1987, 197). Yet our knowledge of Industry 2 within film studies is limited and the finance, production and distribution models of Australian genre movies, as well as their markets and audiences, are under-researched and poorly understood. My own research on Australian horror movies has begun this task in relation to industry dynamics (Ryan 2008; Ryan 2010a forthcoming), history (Ryan 2010b forthcoming), and policy implications (Ryan 2009).

Cultural policy and genre movies

Public support for movie production in Australia since the 1970s has tended to, in many instances, circumscribe certain notions of value; mandate a particular film culture; and limit the types of films produced domestically. It is important to note that between 1970 and 1975 the Australian Film Development Corporation administered quite a different kind of cultural policy – financing numerous commercially successful ocker comedies in particular – before it was replaced by the Australian Film Commission (1975-2008) with an emphasis on fostering cultural films. Similarly, the Film Finance Corporation and the Australian Film Commission's

incorporation into the super agency, Screen Australia, in July 2008, marks the beginning of a new era of policy for the film industry. This section refers to the second period, the legacies of which still influence industry today.

Cultural policy's narrowness has tended to 'shut out' some genres from funding environments and mainstream film culture – so much so that horror and action/adventure movies (*Race for the Yankee Zephyr* (1981), *Mad Max* (1979), *Stunt Rock* (1978), *Death Cheaters* (1976)), among others, have barely been recognised as Australian filmmaking traditions. Moreover, cultural policy has largely written off commercial movie genres as debased production without cultural resonance and as an affront to 'quality' Australian cinema. However, despite their disreputable nature, many of the most successful local horror movies including *Wolf Creek* (2005), *Razorback* (1984), *Undead* (2003), and *Black Water* (2008) have been distinctly 'Australian' – containing identifiably Australian character types, settings and cultural themes – and consumed in national and international markets as 'Australian horror films'.

Film policy has sought to fund cultural production in an attempt to foster a positive sense of national identity. However, as the Australian film industry becomes increasingly integrated into a global audiovisual sector, what constitutes Australian content continues to blur. In a diverse multicultural society a 'national identity' is a problematic term with 'Australians' now comprised of a mix of diverse ethnicities which undermines traditional ocker rural-dominated representations of Australianness (Rayner 2000). Nevertheless, Australian films falling outside certain constructs of Australianness are refused the status of Australian film and have largely been excluded from industry discussion. As O'Regan (1995) has argued, how can the art-house film *The Piano* (1993), directed by a New Zealander (Jane Campion), shot in New Zealand, but financed by Australian public finance, be celebrated as Australian when *Dark City* (1998), a science-fiction film shot in Australia, written and directed by an Australian (Alex Proyas), but financed by an international studio, is not considered Australian?

Tensions that arise for horror films, for example, relate to a number of issues. On the one hand, art-house films carry the label of prestige cinema and target middle-aged audiences – long the preferred demographic for Australian films. On the other hand, as we have seen, pulp genres have faced contempt within Australian film culture and youth audiences have historically been neglected by the Australian film industry. Australian films that secure domestic cinema release, prestigious film festival screenings/nominations/awards at festivals such as Cannes or Sundance, and national and international critical acclaim have long been regarded as a measure of a film's success and prestige within Australian cinema. Recent examples of such movies include *Somersault* (2004), and *Little Fish* (2005). On the other hand, profits, international sales, the recoupment of production budgets and national and international box office returns, although generally celebrated if a film is perceived as a 'quality' and 'critically successful' movie, have often been secondary concerns.

Moreover, notions of cultural production as entertainment are virtually non-existent in Australian academic and policy cinema discourse. Nor have Australian movies typically been produced as entertainment cinema – *Crocodile Dundee* (1986) and *Happy Feet* (2006) are among the exceptions – and notions of audience have tended

to be secondary concerns. Like the notion of genre more generally, entertainment cinema has been devalued in contrast to cultural art-house films. It is important to note that debate about entertainment and cinema does occur within news media and public commentary through talkback radio, opinion columns, editorials, and fandom, though rarely within industry literature, policy debate, and film criticism which are the focus of this paper.

The renaissance of genre and the positive impacts of Ozploitation

Australian cinema has experienced a mini-genre movie renaissance in recent years. Between 2000 and 2008, there has been a surge in local genre movie production spearheaded by horror movies with well over 60 horror titles produced during this period (Ryan 2008). *Daybreakers* (2010), *Wolf Creek* (2005), *Rogue* (2007), *Undead* (2003), and *Storm Warning* (Blanks, 2006), have all experienced varying degrees of popularity, mainstream visibility, and commercial and/or cult success in national and international markets. *Wolf Creek* and *Daybreakers* have become major commercial successes, earning over A\$100 million in combined gross revenue to date, while titles such as *Undead*, *Storm Warning*, *Black Water*, and *Lake Mungo* have achieved worldwide cult success and solid performances in global video markets (Ryan 2010 forthcoming).

At the same time, genre filmmaking has, to an extent, become more culturally legitimate in recent years. In the late 1990s, writer-director Bill Bennett (Bennett, quoted in George 1998) argued that ‘Australians rarely make pure genre films such as thrillers, horror flicks or action films. Genre is such a Hollywood thing, and goes hand-in-hand with commerce ... Australia has never had to make genre-films’ because of the public funding environment ‘and rarely bothers to try’ (Bennett, quoted in George 1998). However, as the then CEO of the Pacific Film and Television Commission (PFTC), Robin James, recently argued, “‘if you’re an independent producer and you want to make production your business, you can’t afford to ignore the horror genre’” (James, quoted in Shore 2007). James’ remarks clearly represent a major shift in genre’s status within the Australian film industry.

A renewed interest in genre movies has also been marked by growing research on the subject. The film journals *Senses of Cinema* and *Metro Magazine* have dedicated special issues to the reappraisal of Ozploitation cinema. Individual scholars are examining various aspects of genre. Thomas’ (2009) article examines the rise of the Ozploitation phenomenon and the role Quentin Tarantino played in the documentary’s success; Adrian Martin’s (2010 forthcoming) essay explores questions around the corpus of movies that constructs Ozploitation’s narrative; while Jack Sargeant (2009) compared the ‘ozploitation’ movie *Mad Dog Morgan* (1976) with recent anti-western *The Proposition* (2005), arguing that these movies challenge tradition bushranger narratives. Key Ozploitation films have been the subject of the Currency Press’ Australian Classics series, from *Alvin Purple* (Lumby 2008) to *Mad Max* (Martin 2003). Moran and Vieth’s (2006) *Film in Australia: An Introduction* is one of the first attempts to explore Australian cinema’s output by popular movie genres, including action, adventure, horror, science fiction, crime, the musical, and so on. (Yet with limited research in the field this study is very much an introduction.) All of this research is beginning to acknowledge, and pay critical attention to, filmmaking engaging with popular movie genres within Australian film studies.

Central to genre's renaissance has been the success of *Not Quite Hollywood* in motivating recent academic interest in Australian genre cinema. Although not a box-office success upon release, the documentary was lauded by critics and aficionados alike, and has become a phenomenon, reviving, or perhaps creating, worldwide interest in a largely forgotten and unacknowledged filmmaking culture. The documentary and its popularization of Ozploitation as a brand and discourse has led to the rediscovery and recirculation of a large volume of 1970s and 1980s Australian movies unreleased on DVD and no longer in circulation. As Thomas (2009, 90) has observed, the 'evocative "rebranding" using the term "ozploitation" has opened up present-day possibilities for successful marketing of this diverse set of films'.

Distributors including Umbrella Entertainment and Magna Pacific have since reissued numerous titles featured in *Not Quite Hollywood* – including some of the more obscure titles – which has resulted in the recirculation of a large back catalogue of Aussie genre flicks. Ozploitation movies have since become festival favourites playing at the prestigious Melbourne International Film Festival and retrospective festival screenings. One example is *Dead Country: Australian Horror Classics*ⁱ which showcased a selection of Aussie horror classics including *Razorback*, *Howling III*, and *Body Melt* at the Australian Cinémathèque, Queensland Gallery of Modern Art, in November 2009.

However, while the rebranding of Australian genre movies as Ozploitation has had numerous positive impacts for the rediscovery of these movies, Ozploitation as a critical framework is limited and does little to advance our understanding of Australian genre movies.

Ozploitation's limitations for Australian genre movies

First of all, as Adrian Martin (2010 forthcoming) argues, *Not Quite Hollywood's* coverage of movies is highly subjective and excludes prominent local genre movies which equally deserve recognition. In a similar vein, Heller-Nicholas (2008, 17) has observed the 'notable omission' of '*Body Melt* (1993) and cult favourite *House Boat Horror* (1989)'. An inventory of omissions could easily include *Cassandra* (1986), *Bloodmoon* (1990), *Kadaicha* (1987), *Alison's Birthday* (1981), *Outback Vampires* (1987), *Ghosts of the Civil Dead* (1988), and more recent titles such as *Cut* (2000), *Subterano* (2003), and *Gabriel* (2007) among many other examples. The psychological thriller *Dead Calm* (1989) also fails to receive consideration although one of the few 1980s genre movies to achieve both critical acclaim and commercial success. Consequently, while the corpus of films examined in the documentary has become Australian cinema's *de facto* genre history, *Not Quite Hollywood* does not present a complete body of Australian genre movies and privileges certain movies over others to advance the documentary's argument. For Martin (2010 forthcoming), 'there is a lot of Australian cinema you will not glimpse during even the most frenetic montage sequence in *Not Quite Hollywood*':

All of these examples mark out, very precisely, an area of cinematic experimentation and cinephilic taste *between* 'genre cinema' strictly speaking and the many forms of independent and/or avant-garde cinema in Australia ... And the most active period for that sort of in-between work in

Australia was precisely 1985-2005. *Not Quite Hollywood* avoids this corpus because it does not fit the argument of a 'hidden' national cinema's death and rebirth – and also because it does not match the agenda of the cultural sensibility from which the project springs (Martin 2010 forthcoming).

A related issue is the documentary's attempt to contemporise Ozploitation. As Heller-Nicholas explains, 'while the commercial viability of *Not Quite Hollywood* clearly depended upon its relevance to contemporary Australian film culture, the hasty and far-too-tidy manner in which films like *Wolf Creek* and *Undead* are declared as the Next Wave with very little explanation seems to expose the clumsiness of the premise' (17). For example, what do *Wolf Creek* and *Undead* – both low budget titles benefiting from advances in digital video, strong global demand for horror movies, and the rise of DVD markets (see Ryan 2008) – have in common with movies produced for drive-ins, and VHS video markets (with a sell-through ceiling), and many financed under the defunct 10BA tax regime? The answer is little. As this suggests, film studies analysis is complicated by the fact that the term is often applied anachronistically to contemporary genre movies even though it originates from discussion of 1970s and 1980s genre movies produced under very different social, cultural, political and economic circumstances.

Another important issue is that Ozploitation is a broad catch-all term lumping together an extremely diverse range of films. The documentary examines three primary tropes which correlate loosely to generic categories. 'Ockers, Knockers, Pubes and Tubes' accounts largely for 1970s 'ocker comedies' such as *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972), and sex comedies including *Alvin Purple* (1973) and *Stork* (1971). 'Comatose Killers and Outback Chillers' is dedicated to horror-infused thrillers *Patrick* (1978), *Road Games* (1981), and *Next of Kin* (1982), and horror flicks *Razorback* (1984), *Howling III* (1987), and *Lady Stay Dead* (1981) among others. The third category 'High octane Disasters and Kung Fu Masters' is less contained and encompasses action/adventure *Race for the Yankee Zephyr* (1981), *Stunt Rock* (1978), and *Turkey Shoot* (1981) (though often regarded as horror exploitation), kung-fu movie *The Man from Hong Kong* (1975), the western/adventure *Mad Dog Morgan* (1976), and road movies *Mad Max* (1979), and *Stone* (1974).

While the diversity of films is not necessarily a problem in its own right, Ozploitation brings together movies across a spectrum of non-generic/experimental filmmaking, popular genres and exploitation cinema with little in common. The most notable example is the eerie art-house movie *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) which is portrayed as the antithesis of Ozploitation movies, even though growing literature on Australian genre movies identifies *Picnic* as part of Australian fantastique or Gothic cinema which has had a major influence on the development of a broad tradition of *terror Australis*. *Dead-End-Drive-In* (1986) is another example. Generically the movie is difficult to define – containing post-apocalyptic movie elements, punk-culture influences, action sequences, road movie tropes – and experimental cinema may be an equally appropriate label.

Nor is a large proportion of so called 'ozploitation' in fact exploitation cinema. *Turkey Shoot*, *Fair Game* (1982), *Howling III*, and *Stunt Rock* (1978) among others are carried by gratuitous violence, explosions, and in some cases nudity, and can clearly be labelled exploitation. On the other hand, many of the most prominent titles

including *Mad Max*, *Razorback*, *Patrick*, *Road Games*, *BMX Bandits* (1983), and even *The Man from Hong Kong*, are genre movies. As Thomas (2009, 92) has observed, 'is Hartley perhaps stretching the parameters of what would normally be considered exploitation cinema? After all, not all genre films are necessarily exploitation'. *Not Quite Hollywood* thus conflates 'genre movies', 'experimental cinema' and 'exploitation movies', yet emphasises the latter.

Hartley defends the term Ozploitation in a conversation with Tom Ryan (2008) for *The Monthly* magazine on the basis that in the 1970s and 1980s, art-house films were Australia's mainstream cinema, while genre movies were relegated to B-movies. For Hartley (2008), 'our mainstream films became our underbelly exploitation cinema in Australia. And I think that's why the term fits because they were never conceived as mainstream films in Australia even though they had the bigger budgets and they had the mainstream audience subject matter. They were considered our B-movies'. What Hartley refers to here is the cultural and critical status of genre movies within Australian cinema during this period. While he makes a good point, for film studies this does little to ameliorate the fact that the vast majority of so-called 'Ozploitation' movies are fundamentally genre movies – *not* exploitation cinema – regardless of how they were culturally and critically received.

For example, what thematic, stylistic and generic characteristics do 'ocker comedies' and 'horror movies' have in common? Ocker comedies were heavily influenced by local theatre of the late 1960s and early 1970s and characterised by 'Australian vernacular and behaviours, a defiant localism, a concern with Australian group rituals and social life', vulgar humour, racism, and the 'ocker' (Dermody and Jacka 1988, 77). On the other hand, Australian horror movies engage with universal horror movies conventions (plotlines, iconography, themes, and character types), or in the case of *Howling III* and even *Razorback*, subvert or parody generic codes and conventions (O'Regan 1996, 173; Laseur 1993), although many titles do contain distinctly Australian characteristics in the marketplace. Overtly 'Aussie' horror titles often revolve thematically around post-colonial fears of, and the struggle for survival against, a dangerous 'Outback' landscape and the revenge of nature. In *Not Quite Hollywood*, what unites such movies is that they were commercially oriented, cavalier approaches to filmmaking, and in opposition to art-house movies.

For Alexandra Heller-Nicholas (2009, 98), analysis of Ozploitation 'allows the tight weave of taste, cultural production and reception, national identity, the notion of 'exploitation' and broad cultural and political discourses to be made explicit'. While this is undoubtedly the case, a preoccupation with notions of excess, taste and trash implicit in the study of genre movies as exploitation cinema is limiting. As Heffernan (2004) has observed, major movie genres are comprised of a spectrum of titles which have low and high ends. Although not always the case, trash cinema often represents a genre's low-end. The high end of the horror genre, for example, is characterised by the Hollywood blockbusters *Jaws* (1975), *The Exorcist* (1973), and more recently *Van Helsing* (2004), targeting broad audiences and characterised by far superior production values, 'star name' actors, and less schlocky subject matter than lower-end titles. The bottom of the spectrum can be characterised by Troma movies (horror titles produced by the studio Troma Entertainment) typified by schlock, often Z-Grade, gore-soaked horror comedies such as *Poultrygeist: Night of the Chicken Dead* (2006), and *Tromeo and Juliet* (2006).

As this suggests, while the discussion of Ozploitation enables analysis of issues around taste, reception, national identity, and 'broad cultural and political discourses' it does so within the domain of exploitation or paracinema. In other words it limits our understanding of Australian genre cinema's heritage to the low end of genre and restricts study of such films to a narrow exploitation framework – the confines of taste politics, cinema of difference, notions of 'good' and 'bad' cinema, and the idea of genre filmmaking as excessive and exploitative. In so doing, such an emphasis precludes all other notions of value, making genre a secondary concern. As a result, Ozploitation sheds little light on the characteristics of individual movie genres such as action, horror, and road movies etc. Such a treatment of genre ignores or deflects attention away from the generic conventions, and thematic and stylistic characteristics of Australian genre movies and the nature of the genre they comprise.

Towards Australian entertainment cinema

In filmmaking, entertainment cinema is genre cinema. This paper has examined the position of genre movies within Australian cinema and the various ways they have been treated within film studies and critical discourse. The paper suggests that Australian genre cinema or local traditions of filmmaking engaging with popular movie genres have rarely been acknowledged or discussed within film studies and history. Australian genre movies have often been disconnected from discussion of genre and examined under other critical terms of reference. In recent years, Ozploitation has become synonymous with Australian genre movies and debate around genre and Australian cinema. The paper, however, suggests that Ozploitation is a limited critical tool for film studies.

Ozploitation is an umbrella term for diverse and very different movie genres, few of which are adequately defined by the term. Most importantly, the term emphasises exploitation and trash cinema – though only a small percentage of these films are indeed exploitation films – which detracts from more important discussion of how Australian cinema engages with popular movies genres, the idea of Australian filmmaking as entertainment, and the dynamics of commercial filmmaking practises more generally. Discussion of Australian genre movies as exploitation cinema constrains our understanding of genre movies past and present to the domain of trash cinema and cult audiences, taste politics and questions of value.

As I noted at the start of this paper, the Australian film industry faces ongoing critique of its failure to connect with audiences – of its failure to succeed as entertainment, in fact. In addressing this problem, the concept of 'ozploitation' is a double-edged sword. Film studies would be better served by discussion of Australian genre cinema, and the critical examination of how local filmmaking traditions engage with individual popular movie genres. While local genre movies engage with universal generic conventions, they do so within a unique national production system and cultural context which ultimately shapes culturally unique filmmaking traditions. Rather than disconnecting Australian genre movies from their natural generic framework, film studies should investigate the thematic, generic and stylistic nature of individual movie genres including action, crime, thriller, horror, road movies, war movies and so on, to ascertain their character types, tropes and (cultural) themes, iconographies, industrial contexts, and histories among others.

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ⁱ http://qag.qld.gov.au/cinematheque/past_programs/2009/dead_country

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